

Hundreds rally for Paterson imam (HERALD NEWS)

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KEVIN R. WEXLER, HERALD NEWS | 05/08/08 12:50
PM

Imam Mohammad Qatanani stood with his family in front of federal immigration court in Newark to acknowledge his supporters from across Broad Street. (KEVIN R. WEXLER / HERALD NEWS)

NEWARK -- Cries of "Allahu Akbar" ('God is the greatest!' in Arabic) echoed on Broad Street as hundreds gathered to support Imam Mohammad Qatanani outside federal immigration court this morning.

Qatanani, the beloved spiritual leader of the Islamic Center of Passaic County in Paterson stopped and waved to the crowd before entering the Peter W. Rodino Jr. Federal Building on the first day of his deportation trial.

Qatanani was convicted by an Israeli military court on two accounts of participating in Hamas between 1989 and 1991, according to documents presented by the government today in its case against the cleric.

But the documents discussed during the first morning of testimony have a number of omissions and discrepancies that U.S. Immigration Court Judge Alberto J. Riefkohl took issue with.

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Riefkohl questioned why Qatanani's name did not appear on a list of those present during the plea hearing, and why two different birthdates were used to identify him.

"Do you think this is significant?" asked Riefkohl to Amos Guiora, the government's first witness and a former Israeli prosecutor and judge in Gaza and the West Bank.

After pausing, Guiora said no.

For nearly 13 years, Qatanani has led of the Paterson mosque.

He, his wife and three of his six children face deportation after the government rejected their application for permanent U.S. residency in 2006 because he failed to disclose the conviction.

Whether a conviction in Israeli military court holds up in the U.S. is a central debate in the three-day case.

The court has not authenticated the documents, said Claudia Slovinsky, Qatanani's attorney, during the trial in Newark.

About 50 supporters for the imam watched the proceedings within the courtroom.

Several hundred Muslims, Christians and Jews rallied outside the court, waving signs that read "Imam Qatanani, an interfaith leader, a voice of moderation, a peace advocate, good for America."

Speakers including Mohamed El Filali, outreach director for the Islamic Center addressed the crowd.

"There's a Muslim community standing to the challenge," El Filali said from a raised platform, surrounded by supporters in front of the courthouse.

In the afternoon, the government will present its second witness, an FBI agent who interviewed the imam in 2005 as part of his residency application, in the afternoon.